An official website of the United States government Here's how you know

AAA

Building and Sustaining Inclusive Educational Practices (January 2025)

Dear Colleague Letter on Inclusive Educational Practices Guidance
PDF

Guidance on Inclusive Educational Practices
PDF

Our nation has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to providing every child with an equal opportunity to an education. Two Federal laws that address the education for children with disabilities are the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), signed into law in 1965 and 1975, respectively. Together, the ESEA and the IDEA provide the system and structure to ensure that children with disabilities have access to learning environments that meet their individual needs. The U.S. Department of Education (Department) is issuing this guidance to provide State educational agencies (SEAs), local educational agencies (LEAs), schools, educators, and members of the public with a better understanding of the ESEA and the IDEA requirements and

guiding principles to support the implementation of inclusive educational practices for students with disabilities.

The ESEA was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who believed that "full educational opportunity" should be "our first national goal." The ESEA has focused on advancing equity and upholding critical protections for America's students from disadvantaged backgrounds through its requirements, programs, and funding. Similarly, when President Gerald Ford signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the predecessor statute to the IDEA, he did so in response to systemic exclusion of students with disabilities from public schools, which only educated one in five students with disabilities at that time. Since 1975, the IDEA has pioneered educational opportunity for children with disabilities through its mandate of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE)—two primary requirements that continue to drive the education of children with disabilities today.

Disability is a natural part of the human experience. Almost 45 million adults in the U.S. have a disability, and nearly 7.9 million students ages 3 through 21 received special education and related services under the IDEA in the 2023-2024 school year, representing over 15 percent of all children enrolled in public schools. The IDEA requires that every FAPE-eligible child with a disability receive an individualized education program (IEP) that includes information on how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (i.e., the same curriculum as for nondisabled students) and includes goals that meet the child's needs to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum. At the same time, the ESEA requires that States and LEAs apply the same challenging State academic standards to all public schools and public school students, including students with disabilities, in the State (except for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities for whom the State may define alternate academic achievement standards aligned with the State's content standards).

The IDEA and the ESEA have the same goal of improving academic achievement through high expectations and high-quality education programs. The ESEA works to achieve that goal by focusing on challenging State academic standards and accountability systems that are designed to measure student performance, providing supports for educators and resources for a well-rounded education, and emphasizing evidence-based instruction; and the IDEA complements those efforts by focusing on how to best support students with disabilities, individually and within ESEA-created systems. When Congress reauthorized the IDEA in 2004, it found that the education of students with disabilities can be made more effective by coordinating the IDEA with other LEA, State, and Federal school improvement efforts, including improvement efforts under the ESEA. Recognizing that "the vast majority of students with disabilities can access the general education curriculum and perform at the same level as their non-disabled peers if given the appropriate accommodations," this coordination ensures that students with disabilities benefit from such efforts and that special education is viewed as a service rather than a physical location. This coordination is particularly necessary given these data:

- In the 2022-2023 school year, the majority of students with disabilities spent 80% or more of their day in the general education class. However, the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities is significant, ongoing, and long standing. Despite increases in children and youth with disabilities being physically present in general education classrooms, students with disabilities experience less time learning content in the grade-level standards, less instructional time, and less content coverage than their nondisabled peers;
- Students with disabilities graduate high school at lower rates and drop out of school at higher rates than their peers without disabilities; and
- Students with disabilities graduate from college at lower rates than those without disabilities, and those with disabilities who did graduate were less likely to be employed full-time than their peers without disabilities.

In November 2023, the Department and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services jointly issued *Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs*, a resource that reaffirms that all young children with disabilities should have access to high-quality inclusive early childhood programs that provide individualized and appropriate support so they can fully participate alongside their peers without disabilities and achieve their full potential. From a child's earliest educational experience to their access to postsecondary opportunities, inclusive educational practices can positively shape the outcomes of students with and without disabilities.

With this guidance, the Department furthers its mission of promoting student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access for students of all ages. The Department believes that the implementation of inclusive educational practices is critical to meeting this goal. Therefore, this guidance:

- describes selected requirements in the ESEA and the IDEA that align with inclusive educational practices; and
- provides guiding principles to support the implementation of inclusive educational practices.

All children deserve to feel a sense of belonging in their learning environment. Designing systems and processes at the State and local levels that support the implementation of inclusive educational practices is critical to achieving this vision.

Dear Colleague Letter | Guidance on Inclusive Educational Practices

SHARE:

Last modified on January 17, 2025

- U.S. Department of Education
- Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)
- Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)
- OSERS Blog
- IDEA by State
- Contacts
- IDEA State Contacts
- Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004

ABOUT IDEA

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities

CONNECT WITH US

throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children.